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ABSTRACT

Patterns of reasoning indigenous to American Indians and Alaska Natives are based upon a fluid holistic mindset, born out of intimate observation of the natural world and predicated on the understanding that nothing exists in isolation. All action has consequence and all interaction is significant. Just as American Indians themselves have been culturally defined through stereotype and generalization, so American Indian philosophy and cognitive process have been pigeonholed by mainstream perceptions and definitions. A coyote tale illustrates the "top-down" nature of Indian problem-solving, that is, analysis of the problem from the perspective of larger encompassing systems. Symptomatic solutions do not address the fundamental nature of a problem. "Why" questions are avoided since they are not geared toward moving from the general to the specific and because causal interpretation does not resolve the problem. Understanding the conflict between holistic Indian and rational mainstream thought not only provides insight into dilemmas of the American Indian community, but also contains the root of solutions to national problems. Frequently, attempted solutions to environmental or educational problems have been symptomatic; i.e., responses to a specific environmental crisis or modification of some instructional feature. Just as environmental and educational issues could benefit from a movement from symptomatic analysis to systemic observation, so could issues of poverty, economy, and crime. (SV)

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SOUTHEAST TRIBAL WORLDVIEW AND CONTEMPORARY AMERICA.

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There is an American Indian story about a coyote. The coyote is traveling through the desert, and as it walks it speaks to the spirits and asks them to help it solve the problems that arise along the way. When it is thirsty, it prays for rain. When its feet are hot and burning, it prays for clouds to make shade. And in this way the coyote makes it through the desert. But once it is on the other side, the coyote finds that it is hungry. So the coyote travels to a place where it has hidden some food. There it meets a skunk. The coyote and the skunk plan a feast together and place the food in a roasting pit. But, the coyote does not want to have to share the food, so the coyote challenges the skunk to a race knowing that it can easily outrun the smaller animal. The skunk agrees and the race begins. The fox runs very quickly, but the skunk does not run at all and hides nearby. The skunk digs up the food and eats it before the coyote can return.

This story for all its seeming simplicity touches upon a number of highly sophisticated ideas: patterns of reasoning indigenous to American Indian/Alaska Native tribes based upon a fluid holistic mindset, born out of intimate observation of the natural world, and predicated on the understanding that nothing

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on the planet can exist in isolation. The vision that guides the reasoning mind must be aware that all action has consequence and all interaction is an issue of significance, both situational and spiritual.

Just as American Indians themselves have been culturally defined through stereotype and generalization, so American Indian philosophy and cognitive process has been pigeonholed according to lines of reasoning which correspond to a perception of the Indian worldview as defined by mainstream culture; e.g. Indians are concerned about the land, and are therefore conservationists. Indians do not utilize clocks, and are therefore indifferent to time. What is lost through these generalizations is an understanding of the conceptual roots of American Indian cognitive processing, and more importantly, the potential application of that vision into finding solutions to problems currently faced by American society.

Returning to the story of the coyote, the point of the animal's adventure, as observed by the Western/Rational mind, is that the coyote outsmarted himself. He counted upon a superior ability in one area to carry him through a problem which could be resolved in more than one way. The flaw is one of over-confidence. But to the Indian mindset, the coyote's problem was not dependence upon a clear area of superiority, but upon a failure to place the problem in the appropriate perspective. All of the coyote's problems were solved so long as it placed their

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resolution into a larger context and asked the spirits for help. It was only at the point at which it attempted to resolved the problem by cause/effect, symptom/action individual effort that it failed to get what it needed.

The concept of Top/Down decision-making, the analysis of a problem from the point-of-view of the larger systems that encompass it, is an inherent process for American Indian people. Generations of careful observation of the systems and patterns of the natural world evolved into an understanding that symptomatic solutions do not address the fundamental nature of a problem. Owning land does not give you the ability to control the land because it is a part of something considerably larger which cannot be controlled, the Earth. Therefore owning land serves no real purpose.

Another aspect of the Top/Down worldview is the avoidance of "Why" questions. With respect to problem analysis and solution formulation, asking why a particular event occurred, or why a certain problem must be addressed is simply not consistent with American Indian holistic cognitive processing. Such a question is not geared toward moving from the general to the specific in terms of knowledge acquisition, but requires that the provider of the answer "back up" and regress to an interpretation of causes which is not directed toward resolution of the situation at hand. A more appropriate question is "how" an event took place: an understanding of the patterns of action which has led to the

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current situation and therefore suggests a solution consistent with that pattern.

Probably the most notorious example of American Indian Top/Down thinking is the relationship of tribal people to the use of "Clock Time". The traditional interpretation of the relaxed attitude demonstrated by many American Indians toward precise time-keeping has always been rooted in the stereotypical qualities of laziness, or absence of drive. The avoidance of dependence upon numeric time is much more easily understood when examined as an aspect of cognitive processing. With respect to how Indians view their participation with the world, the idea of compartmentalizing a day into a series of minuscule parts is simply ridiculous. A day is a day. Time is essentially an instrument for the measurement of the distance between objects and events. The distance which can be covered in a minute is simply to small to warrant attention.

An appreciation for the conflict between holistic/Indian and rational/mainstream thought processes goes a long way toward providing an understanding of how, after 500 years of interaction, tribal people in this country stand at the brink of genocide at the hands of a federal bureaucracy which has always worshipped detail at the expense of substance. But, more obviously, this conflict also contains the root of solutions for not only dilemmas inherent to the American Indian community, but to a myriad of problems for which the mainstream culture has been

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unable, or unwilling, to find viable solutions.

As previously mentioned, the most visible example is in the cognitive appreciation of issues concerning the environment. When the tribal Top/Down approach is applied to the current planet-wide state of ecological decline, two things become immediately obvious. First, the belief that pollution issues can be addressed at the symptomatic level, that we can continue to apply a series of specific actions to address specific crises, is inherently flawed. This thinking is predicated on the acceptance of the premise that we should be content to await a crisis situation before acting, as in the example of the Exxon Alaskan oil spill. Secondly, it is only through an appreciation of the Earth as an interconnected series of patterned systems, independent of those artificial systems interjected by people, that solutions relative to that understanding can be formulated. Ecological management suffers as much from personalities and politics as it does from toxins and waste.

In my own field, much thought and research has currently been applied to consideration of the United States educational crisis from the point-of-view of holistic problem-solving techniques. Too often, educational professionals have attempted to resolve difficulties with respect to educational delivery in terms of feature modification: better tests, better books, varied presentation, computers. What becomes lost in the scrabble to quantify some kind of positive response is the intention of the

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system as a whole, and the failure of the system as a whole to address its own recognized areas of need. The failure of United States education is not a failure of intent, it is the inability to stop patching a centuries-old system and consider fresh solutions based upon available data and observation of the culture as it actually is in total.

Extensions of this line of reasoning become increasingly obvious. Just as environmental and educational issues could benefit from a movement from symptomatic analysis to systemic observation, so could issues of poverty, economy, and crime. This is not to say that simply altering perspective is the miracle solution to the woes of the world, I am a teacher not a psychic. But what can clearly be said is that we are on the verge of losing a great wisdom, a knowledge of the Earth based upon communicating with the Earth, a vision not directed to conquer but to coalesce, a source of strength and perspective which can lead to new hope for all of us.

If you were to ask a tribal elder, trained in the traditional wisdom of tribal people, to explain the fundamental nature of God, it is highly unlikely that you would receive a sermon pertaining to qualities, analogies, or theologies. What you would most likely be told is that God is a trickster: a fundamental truth based on observation of the "real" world, shaped by the experience of constant change, and tempered by the knowledge that the most important lessons of life are often couched in a humor

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drawn from the absurdity of taking oneself or one's situation too seriously. There is power in this vision as well as in the postulates that have grown from it, hope for the tribal people that believe it, and a fresh perspective for a society in need.

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